

Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

**Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts*
by Sherry Maysonave**



Chapter One

High in the hills of Berkeley, California, the omen hung in the stillness of the late afternoon air like a full moon yet to rise. Seeking refuge, Kate Kindrick huddled in the branches of the walnut tree flanking the driveway of the two-story brick home at 537 Spruce Street.

Kate, a six-year-old who was clueless about the rare seventh sense with which she was gifted—the ability to read human hearts coupled with keen intuition—felt squirmy in her skin. She sniffed at the air, her nose scrunching into a wrinkle. An odd scent seeped into her pores.

Pointing her index finger at the sky, she held it there as a lightning rod, fully expecting something telling to stick to it. Within seconds, as if a definitive substance had pinged her finger, she brought it down mere millimeters from her eyes. Sleuth-like, Kate examined every nuance, paying extra attention to the whorl pattern on her fingertip.

She touched the whorl to her tongue. A fearsome shiver snaked through her, one so potent she jolted, almost falling from the tree. Her fingers clutched frantically, grabbing at the limb and its leafy offshoots. Her body jerked upward forcing her weight to shift. After multiple unstable wobbles, she regained her balance. Even still, a feeling of dread had taken hold, had set up residence as surely as if a horde of poisonous snakes had moved in, their aliveness slithering deep within her.



Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

Inside the house at 537 Spruce Street, an angel waited. She hovered respectfully atop the mound of white icing, atop a thing on Earth called a birthday cake. Her skin appeared to be a translucent plastic, and her eyes were radiant like blue topaz. Her wings, a golden-silvery hue, shimmered in a feathery quiver.

The clock on the kitchen oven clicked, displaying new digital numbers. The angel blinked her eyes. It was now less than one hour before the party, the celebration of Kate's entrance on Earth six years ago. Kate's mother said it was the day she was born to life, and she was. And she wasn't. Not from the angel's perspective, anyway, for the angel had known of the percipient soul who would be named Kate eons before she was born to the Kindrick family that lived on planet Earth.

While eyeing the birthday cake, the angel allowed images to float through her, compelling visions and ponderings of what was likely to transpire long before the clock announced a new day. *Humans always had choices, especially about whether they received or blocked Divine guidance. But their disregard for the universal law—for every action there is a reaction—was often perplexing. Today, though, it was most troubling. Would the subjects in question listen? Would they take heed of the subtle inner urgings, the Almighty's whisperings, that if acted upon could prevent disaster? Or would they make such a misstep that it could spin into motion an entire series of tragic events?* Soon, she would know.

Hoping to shed her angst, the angel focused on the details of the cake. Although she did not partake of earthly cuisine, she was captivated by food, all the textures, colors, and combinations that humans concocted. She found the cake's aroma utterly enticing. What's more, the meringue frosting with its perfect peaks looked heavenly, like fluffy cumulus clouds that invited happy imagination.

Even still, there was no denying it. An ominous aura sheathed the Kindrick kitchen, which gleamed a lemon-yellow hue, one of Kate's favorite colors.

The angel reflected upon little Kate and how she enjoyed color, all colors except orange, that is. Kate loved to eat orange slices, carrot sticks, pumpkin pie, and tangerine popsicles. Nonetheless, she refused to wear the color orange or have anything in her room orange, not pillows or walls. The funny thing, though, was that Kate's hair was somewhat orange, the light burnt-orange shade of a freshly peeled sweet potato, and strikingly similar to the new hair of an Irish-Setter puppy.

Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

Hair color didn't seem to be an issue for dogs, the angel mused. No matter what the breed, hair color didn't evoke howling, yowling, or any concern. And regardless of the exact color of their hair, almost all dogs had brown eyes. Some type of chocolate. Irish Setters were no exception. Take Keebie, for example. She was the Kindrick's Irish Setter, who was expecting puppies soon. Her eyes were similar to S'mores—milk chocolate mixed with a graham-cracker tan—that looked just right, warmly artistic with her burnt-orange hair.

Human eyes were not as predictable. Kate's eyes were green, resembling two big olives.

Much to the angel's chagrin, Kate's cousin, Marilla Marzy, often taunted Kate that she looked like a pizza with her olive-green eyes and saucy red-orange hair. More often than not, Marilla Marzy referred to Kate as *Pizza Girl*, saying it in such a way that her tongue spat out the name as if the pizza tasted rancid.

On the other hand, much to the angel's delight, Kate's favorite uncle—Terrence Ted, otherwise known as TT—admired Kate's unique beauty. He often told Kate that her red hair and green eyes gave her a look of royalty, like a real-life princess. On Kate's fifth birthday, Uncle TT had overheard Marilla Marzy tell Kate that she not only looked like a pizza but that she was uglier than plain old ugly.

TT had then quickly escorted Kate into another room. Caressing her cheek, calming her trembling chin, he had said, "Kate, look at me. I want you to get this. In no way do you resemble a pizza, not any type. And you are not ugly. You are beautiful, Kate. Seriously beautiful."

He had then stared off into space, his eyes locking into a reality that rotated on a different axis. His fists had tightened, gripping time, handfuls of seconds as they passed silently through his fingers. Then he said, "Let's keep in mind that with Marilla Marzy's father forbidding her to wear colored contact lens, she faces the world every day with mismatched eyes. One brown and one green."

The angel sighed at the memory.

The clock flipped its numbers again. Only twenty minutes now. A nervous shudder fluttered the angel's shimmery feathers. Then a dreaded calm, like the still before a storm, settled over her.



Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

Mrs. Kindrick peered out the kitchen window and called out in her soprano voice, “Kate, come down from that tree. Your cake is ready for candles. It’s almost time for the party.”

Six candles waited on the granite countertop, laying in crisscross fashion next to the arrangement of stargazer lilies—Kate’s favorite flower. Fragrant and fully open, the flowers resembled six-pointed stars. Bursting forth from each star’s center was a cluster of antenna tipped with flat round eyes, all gazing upward as if they were unable to contain their fascination for Heaven.

Clutching her cherished toy, a Power-Ranger action figure, Kate skidded around the corner like a veteran baseball player sliding into home plate. Beaming a smile in the direction of the cake, she jumped to her feet and reached for the candles.

“No, wash your hands first,” Kate’s mother shrieked.

Kate sprinted to the sink and turned on the hot water. With sudsy bubbles lathering her hands, she scrubbed at the leaf stains from when she had fought to hold onto the tree limb. Eyeing the cake, she said, “Wow, Mama, my rainbow cake looks awesome.”

Technically, it was not a rainbow cake, but Kate called it that because it had six layers, with each layer being a different color, each representing one year of her life. When cut, the cake would be a six-color delight. That is, six colors when not counting the white frosting. White didn’t count because white contained all colors in the spectrum, even the colors humans on Earth couldn’t see yet—the undiscovered ones.

Most Earthlings’ birthday cakes were decorated to the hilt with icing, with the layers underneath being plain vanilla or chocolate. Not Kate’s. The bottom layer of her cake was red like watermelon while the second one was pineapple yellow, and the third was kiwi green. The fourth layer was berry purple. The fifth was pink like the inside of a fig, and the sixth was sky blue topped with cumulus clouds of fluffy white frosting. A fruity rainbow with a serving of sky.

Perched atop the clouds of icing was Etta Ebella, the angel. Etta Ebella was the name bestowed upon her by Kate’s grandmother, Grammy Mer, who gave Kate the doll the very day Kate was born.

Kate loved to hear the story of when Grammy Mer had presented the angel doll to her—when she was only two hours old. Kate’s tiny eyes had been closed, all tightly squinched. But at the sound of Grammy Mer’s voice,

Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

her baby eyelids had fluttered, had struggled a few seconds, and then opened wide. Then when Grammy Mer held up the doll, Kate's little mouth had begun moving, and tiny purring noises had come forth as if she was trying to talk. Later when Grammy Mer laid her in the bassinet and nestled the winged doll aside her, baby Kate had wrestled her infant arm from the swaddle and placed her wee hand directly on the doll's chest. The pediatric nurse had commented that in all of her years she had never seen a newborn do such a thing.

Although Grammy Mer was now ill, recently struck by an unexplained disease that confined her to a wheelchair and inhibited her speech, she was an award-winning grandmother. When her Grammy Mer was around, Kate felt like she was a precious jewel radiating purpose and value, felt like she was the most important little girl in the entire universe. Although her grandmother could no longer communicate with words, Kate felt completely loved by her. Yes, loved, all the way through to her bones—and beyond.

While rinsing the soap from her hands, Kate's eyes darted about the sunny kitchen searching the lemony walls for why the eerie feeling was inside the house, too. *Had it followed her indoors?* The walls provided no answers, had nothing at all to say.

Locking eyes with the angel, Kate watched the doll's wings flutter ever so slightly and her heart light up like a brilliant diamond. Kate cast a glance at her mother to see if she had noticed, but her mother, busy with the party napkins, was oblivious to Etta Ebella's magic. What's more, she honestly believed that Etta Ebella was just a plastic doll with no life in her.

To Kate, it seemed that many living people in the world possessed less life than Etta Ebella did. They were the ones that were plastic, not real at all. Kate could always spot them—the breathing plastic people.

Some sported wide smiles while their eyes shot angry darts all about them and their hearts quaked with fearful tremors. Others wore frozen frowns and had eyes filled with nothingness while their hearts contained heaps of icebergs. Some had eyes filled with thorns and hearts stacked with sharp spikes—dagger-like weapons ready to shoot at anyone who disagreed with them. And worse yet, some had eyes resembling muddy gravel that blocked all light. Their hearts oozed with puss and scabs from hundreds of deadbolts locked tightly.

The breathing plastic people's hearts and eyes could look a million different ways. The most telling sign, though, was in their hugs: plastic arms and plastic hearts giving out no love at all, not even a smattering.

Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

“Alrighty, Birthday Girl, it’s time to put the candles on your cake,” Mrs. Kindrick said.

To Kate, her mother’s tone was an order, not an invitation. The good part was that her mom would allow her to put the candles anywhere on the cake she wanted. Kate’s mother believed in fostering creativity, letting her young daughter have some choices that were safe and within reason while also allowing her to experience consequences. Like last year.

Kate fingered the raised polka-dots on this year’s candles, remembering her fifth birthday, how she had intentionally dug her fingertips and the candles into the white fluff so she could lick the icing from them. When her mother turned her back, she had even moved the candles around a bit for a double dip. And her tongue had basked in the glorious taste of the meringue frosting. Delicious had quickly turned to dismay, though, when she discovered that meringue icing could not be re-fluffed after it was set.

Her mother had frowned, the corners of her lips turning downward when she had tried to smooth the gouges. She had even heated the spreader in an attempt to warm the icing, hoping to fluff it better. Nonetheless, the icing had remained obstinate, sticky, wrinkled lumps refusing to look like fluffy clouds ever again.

Kate’s daddy had suggested that they scrape off the icing and make another batch, or that he rush out to buy a bakery cake for the party and save that one for them to eat later. But Kate’s mother had said no, absolutely not, that the homemade meringue frosting was a sacred birthday tradition in her family. It was important to appreciate the icing, the cost of its ingredients, and its maker’s love and labor in preparing it.

And so it was, the ugly cake had prevailed, had taken center stage before it was served.

At the family party that year, Uncle TT had said, “Princess, what’s up with ushering in your fifth year with a jacked-up cake?” Interestingly, it had been early in Kate’s fifth year that Grammy Mer had suddenly and mysteriously become incapacitated.

She must usher in her sixth year with a pretty cake, Kate thought. She must because she liked pretty, and because she didn’t want anything bad to happen to anyone she loved. Not this year, not ever again.

“Mama, will you roll up my sleeves for me? I want them rolled up high, up past my elbows. They might mess up the fluffs.”

“Good idea, pumpkin. Here, hold still.”

While her mother made a small cuff with the soft knit fabric, Kate watched Etta Ebella blink her right eye—a playful wink—and then flash one stream of light from her heart. She clearly agreed with this idea of rolling up the sleeves. Kate’s mother didn’t see the doll’s antics. Her focus remained immersed in making repetitive fabric rolls up one arm and then the other.

Picking up one candle, Kate held it by its wick and gently pushed it in through the thick icing, all the way into the cake part. After the second one, her stomach gave a burble as if the candle had poked through it. Nevertheless, Kate kept her attention on the art of planting the next four candles.

One by one, she set all six candles in the frosting—all without a single smudge. Her heart swelled with pride as she admired the design. The candles looked so pretty—in fact, simply beautiful—in a half-circle around the front of Etta Ebella, edging her dress perfectly.

“Now, Kadie Girl, is it a good idea to have the candles so close to Etta Ebella?” Kate’s mother asked. “Remember, the candles will burn for a bit while we all sing the *Happy Birthday* song to you.”

Kate heard the disapproval. There was no mistaking the way her mother said her name. When her mother called her Katie Girl that was clue enough, but when she changed the “t” to “d,” as in Kadie, that meant her mother clearly disagreed with her choice. But no, Kate would not move the candles, couldn’t move them without messing up the icing. She remained adamant; she wanted the candles exactly where they were, and so did Etta Ebella.

The truth was Etta Ebella didn’t think placing the candles that close to her was a good idea, either. No, she didn’t, not at all. Blinking her blue topaz eyes repeatedly, Etta Ebella had tried to warn Kate by sending a prickly sensation to invade her stomach.

Kate had felt it, the odd bristly burble, but she had chosen to ignore it.

“Alrighty, Kadie girl, have it your way,” Kate’s mother said. “Now run upstairs and change into your new party dress. It’s all laid out on the bed for you. Your new sparkly shoes, too.”



Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

The door bell chimed three times in quick succession, a code. Her face alight with glee, Kate ran down the stairs at breakneck speed, all the while yelling, “Uncle TT is here!”

She flung open the door and could barely see her uncle’s face because of the tower of presents he carried. “Wow, are all those for me?”

“Specail delivery for Miss Katelyn Kindrick. Happy Birthday, Princess. You betcha, they’re for you, one for every year you are old. They’re bulky though, so lead the way to the party table.”

Kate took off skipping toward the kitchen. “Mama, look, Uncle TT has brought me six presents.”

“That bottom one looks mighty big. Terrence, you spoil her terribly.”

The doorbell rang again. “I’ll get that,” Kate’s mother said.

TT eyed the cake. “Your cake is beautiful this year, Princess, just like you.” He started to walk away when a shiver slithered through him. He looked back to the cake, then all around the kitchen. Everything seemed in order.



Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

After feasting in the dining room, the party guests began gathering in the kitchen near the cake table. Kate's grandfather, Poppy Pop, rolled in Grammy Mer's wheelchair and locked it into position.

Eagerly, Grammy Mer inspected the cake. On Kate's other birthdays, even when the cake was not appealing, like last year, she had felt joyous upon seeing the doll presiding over the cake like a guardian angel. But this year, her stomach knotted at the sight.

As everyone found their places, Kate hopped from one foot to the next, while eyeballing the mound of brightly wrapped presents. Her daddy's sister, Sammy Sue, and her husband, Sandy, each picked up a present and shook it a bit. One made a sound; the other didn't. Sammy Sue pointed to the one that rattled, suggesting Kate open it first.

Her mother's sister, Abigail, and her family— Abigail's husband, Vaynem, and their teenage daughter, Marilla Marzy— straggled in from the dining room. When they joined the birthday circle, Marilla Marzy stood a bit aloof from her parents.

Uncle TT came dashing into the circle and stood next to Marilla Marzy just as Kate's mother brought out the lighter for the candles.

Grammy Mer opened her mouth with the intention of saying STOP, but only an eerie garbled scream came forth.

Kate's daddy said, "Mom, you're starting the song before the candles are lit." He laughed, trying to lighten the moment of sad truth—Grammy Mer could no longer speak or control the sounds that burst forth from her.

Kate looked to Grammy Mer, searching her face. That strange prickle returned to her tummy as she tried to read her grandmother's expression. *Surely, it was a smile since it was time for her big birthday moment*, Kate decided. But little did she know, her grandmother's face muscles no longer worked on command, her brain incapable of sending the signals.

With a shrug of her shoulders, Kate placed a hand on the lighter alongside her mother's hand. Together, they moved it from one candle to the next until all six were blazing.

Kate's mother started the song. Others joined in on cue, all singing "*Happy Birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you.*"

Suddenly, TT sneezed. And then again. And again. Over and over in rapid succession, he sneezed, thunderous rib-racking sneezes as if a massive cloud of fusty polluted air had descended upon him.

Excerpt from *The Girl Who Could Read Hearts* by Sherry Maysonave

Giggles welled up in Kate. Others joined in, some laughing heartily. Poppy Pop slapped his knee. Kate's daddy swiped at the tears that seeped from his eyes as he howled. Uncle Sandy was bent double with deep belly laughs. Aunt Sammy Sue's mouth was open with a huge grin.

Kate's mother tried starting the birthday song again. Ear-splitting sneezes interrupted her attempt. She tried once more, to no avail; she clutched at her stomach like it was laughing, too.

TT continued to sneeze, the most monstrous sneezing fit he had ever had or anyone there had ever witnessed.

The only person who didn't laugh was Vaynem, Marilla Marzy's father, whose eyes remained on the cake.

Everyone else remained riveted upon TT's face contorting with the sneezes. Cartoon-like, TT's nose continued to twitch, especially his nostrils, as if more sneezing was yet to come.

When the twitching finally ceased, and Kate turned to make her wish and blow out the candles, her heart almost stopped beating.

The hem of Etta Ebella's dress was melting, the bottom of her left wing was turning brown, and her cheek had a large moist blister on it as if her whole face might dissolve away. A bright flame spiked from the angel's shoulder, rising all the way up to the ceiling.

Screams and frantic commotion flooded the Kindrick kitchen.

Kate's mighty wish on her sixth birthday quickly converted to a fervent prayer: *Dear Jesus, please don't let Etta Ebella die. It's all my fault. Please, Dear Jesus, please HELP us! We need a miracle.*



End of Excerpt

